

Central Plains Pipe Tomahawk, c. 1860

Object: #31215. A pipe tomahawk with two “batwing” cut outs. Attributed to the Central Plains, c.1860. Forged iron, wood, brass tacks, native tanned hide and seed beads. The haft is 23" long; the blade is 9 3/4" long and 4 1/4" tall

Provenance: Reportedly collected from the estate of Robert E. Lee;
Private family collection, Manassas, VA;
To John Hayes of Gettysburg, PA;
To Jim Hart of Mapleshade, NJ;
To the Reagan Wilson Collection, GA;
To a private collection, MD.

Artistic and Historical Significance:

By Thomas Cleary

Of the weapons that were developed in Native America, few are as iconic as the tomahawk. Particularly unique among these is the Plains “batwing” tomahawk (Figures 1-2). “Batwing” tomahawks derive their name from the bat-like cutouts which decorate the blade. To the handful of collectors lucky enough to own one, they are typically the centerpieces to any Plains Indian weapons collection. According to Mark Francis, author of *The Mark Francis Collection of American Indian Art: A Photo Journal* (2010), “Batwing cut out tomahawks are the rarest of the rare, with very few documented examples known....[they] command top attention from the artifact community.” This subject tomahawk is no exception and perhaps stands as one of the finest examples extant (Figure 1).

Long before the creation of the Plains “batwing” style, tomahawks had gained favor amongst Native Americans, centuries before, further east. The word “tomahawk” was initially a collective term used to refer a wide variety of Iroquoian and Algonquian striking weapons. During the Fur Trade (circa 1650-1870), however, the meaning of the word narrowed. By combining a modified Halberd blade with a short haft, the inhabitants of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence River Valleys pioneered the development of new weapon that would become incredibly popular. (The Halberd head was a British metal weapon head, created in the late 14th century, which traditionally sat atop a long polearm.) This new weapon was more balanced and manageable. In heavily wooded areas like the Great Lakes and Woodlands, it proved effective as both a projectile

and striking weapon. By 1750, the “pipe” tomahawk had been developed and was being widely used. New World weapons makers had modified their tomahawks to include a pipe bowl on their axe heads as well as a hollow smoking channel in their hafts. This small modification made the tomahawk incredibly popular, as it now had the dual purpose of being both a tobacco pipe and a weapon. Amongst the Indians, it emerged as the quintessential instrument for conducting war; but now it could also be utilized for tobacco rituals and peaceful negotiations. For Anglo explorers pushing westward, it became invaluable for gifting.

On the Plains, the tomahawk further evolved to accommodate the horse cultures therein. Plains warriors preferred robust weapons that were well-suited for mounted combat in open arenas. Additionally, the remoteness of the Plains made local blacksmiths, woodworking tools, steel and iron hard to come by. These weapons consequently became less decorative and more utilitarian. Fanciful metal inlay, for example, a practice adopted by many eastern pipe tomahawk makers, was abandoned for more practical ornamentation. Tomahawk hafts became lighter with hot-filing; blades became thinner and longer; the tomahawks also became increasingly ornamented with medicine, decorative drops, paint, brass tacks and metal wire (Figures 1-2). The more elegant examples have stylized hafts and elaborately cut out heads.

Tomahawk ornamentation on the Plains was unique and different heads went in and out of vogue on the Plains through the decades. Arguably one of the most sought after between 1860 and 1880 was the “batwing” head. Only twenty or so examples are extant. These weapons have anywhere from one to three “batwing” cut outs. These cut outs were fairly generic, with their being at least three distinctly shaped cut out forms. And while the orientation of the cut outs and the cut out sequence is specific to each tomahawk, it is presumed that their number increased over time. In other words, earlier examples are thought have one cut out; examples with two or three are presumed to be slightly later. The majority of batwing tomahawks have two cut outs, as demonstrated by the subject tomahawk. Figure 3 shows the evolution of the cut outs, showing the different shaped used.

Identifying the artists responsible for the development of the “batwing” head is challenging. Photographic evidence confirms that the batwing was popular in the Northern Plains and TransMontaigne regions (Figure 4-6). Several tribal headmen are shown holding them. Yet, there is no documentation which shows these being used further south, suggesting that these heads were produced and exclusively distributed to northern tribes. And while some scholars have speculated that one metal smith was responsible for producing these heads, the fact that extant examples employ different metals, construction techniques and stylizing features implicates multiple, highly-skilled artists.

The symbolism behind the cut outs is equally obscure. The term, “batwing”, is a colloquial term that has been used by collectors and dealers for decades to describe the oddly shaped cut outs. The term bares no art historical significance and sadly offers no insight into the head’s origin. According to a study that was done in 1954 by Arthur

Woodward, there is some similarity between the cut out shapes and those that were used on Spanish and French relics to symbolize the fifth wound of Christ. Plausible as this theory may be, these shapes do appear to be standardized, meaning that they likely originated from a specific source. But, be they derived from furniture upholstery, religious vestments or otherwise, more research is still obviously needed.

The subject tomahawk is an excellent example of a “batwing” pipe tomahawk. The weapon has a forged iron blade and a hot-filed shaft decorated with brass tacks. Securing the “batwing” blade to the haft is a small hide gasket. The majority of the haft is wrapped with a leather cover, decorated with alternating lanes of blue and crimson seed beads. Exhibiting all of the adornments popularized by 1860-70 Plains warrior culture, a tomahawk such as this would have been carried to tribal councils and ceremonies. The owner who carried this weapon to these functions would have been well-received, as the weapon would have validated his presence. This is further evidenced by the strong tobacco residue that still remains in the subject tomahawk’s smoking channel.

First and foremost, however, the subject tomahawk was a weapon. The inclusion of a beaded haft by no means excluded this piece from the battlefield, as some might suggest. To the contrary, the warped head, the re-tacking along the haft and the bead loss suffered along the hand-held portions of the handle-wrap are the product of functional use. (It is possible, but unlikely, that the head and haft might have been married a decade before the beaded handle was attached. Still, the beaded handle demonstrates patina that is in keeping with Plains utilitarian artwork from the 1860-70s.)

The retacking and the warped head are particularly significant, as they demonstrate the importance of the weapon (Figures 7-8). Through the decades, the metal heads and wooden hafts on tomahawks were often replaced when they were damaged or broken. Decorative tacks would fall out as the haft warped (and could no longer be put back); heads would crack or rust; hafts would splinter or break. That the owners of the subject tomahawk, through the generations, left the head and haft married indicates that this was a weapon worth keeping intact. The retacking on one side of the tomahawk alone shows that the owner was willing to forgo the aesthetics of an asymmetrical “X” tacking design in order to keep the haft. Additionally, the importance of the “batwing” is evidenced here by the fact that head was never replaced, in spite of being warped. The “batwing” head was such an elite symbol of prestige that the warrior decided to keep it.

With the approach of 1900, the Plains warrior culture was dramatically changing. So, too, was the role of the tomahawk therein. The influx of the Colt Pistol and the Winchester lever action rifle into the Plains in the second half of the 1800s quickly rendered the weapon obsolete. Yet, despite this shift, the Plains pipe tomahawk still retained its importance as a symbol of leadership. Respected men still carried them to council meetings and powwows. Young warriors, who were without buffalo to chase and enemies to fight, could no longer gain honors through their own exploits. They instead inherited honors from their fathers. An heirloom such as the subject tomahawk would have therefore become increasingly coveted as it was passed down, particularly since each new owner would inherit the honors of the previous owner.

How the piece wound up in a small family collection in Virginia is unknown. Perhaps the piece traveled eastward as a spoil of war, collected by a descendent who served on the frontier in the wake of the Civil War – the possibilities abound. Regardless, the importance of this weapon cannot be understated. Both as an artwork and as a historical artifact, the subject tomahawk is simply exceptional. In his authentication letter to the present owner (Figure 9), Jim Hart, a respected authority on Plains weaponry, calls the piece, “one of the finest ‘batwing’ examples [he] has had the pleasure of handling.” The provenance alone speaks to the overall caliber of the piece, as it has been handled by some of the most reputable names in the American Indian Art community.

Image Appendix:



Figure 1. The subject pipe tomahawk with two “batwing” cut outs. Attributed to the Central Plains, c.1860. Forged iron, wood, brass tacks, native tanned hide and seed beads. The haft is 23" long; the blade is 9 3/4" long and 4 1/4" tall. (H. M. Grimmer Inventory #31215).



Figure 2. A pipe tomahawk with two “batwing” cut outs. Attributed to the Western/Northern Plains, c.1870. Forged iron, wood, brass tacks, native tanned hide and seed beads. The haft is 22" long; the blade is 9 1/2" long and 4" tall. Formerly of the Marv Lince collection, Oregon. This piece was auctioned off at Cowan’s in September of 2013; it sold for \$60,000.00. The beaded drop is a representation of a pronghorn antler, an important animal in Plains culture – one often associated with male virility.

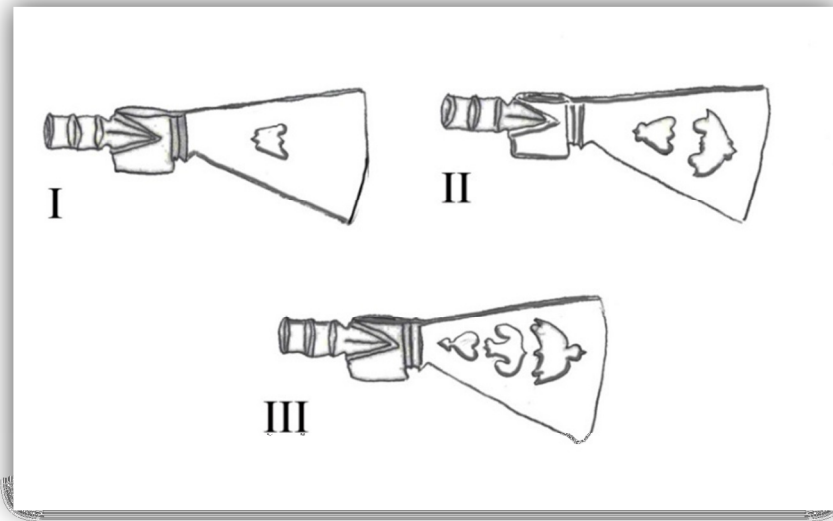


Figure 3. A sketch showing the different “batwing” tomahawk heads. Between 1860 and 1880, the designs became progressively complex with the inclusion of more cut outs. The sketch shows the arrangement of the shapes in three phases. The shapes shown in Phase I and II are the most common, with larger shapes proceeding after smaller ones as the blade fans outward. Phase I heads were produced in the mid-nineteenth century, while Phase III heads were produced decades later. The progression was by no means standard and some blacksmiths took artistic liberties. As Figure 5 demonstrates, sometimes they used the same cut out multiple times, only changing the shape’s orientation on the blade.



Figure 4. A cabinet portrait card of Red Dog, a famous Oglala Sioux Indian. The photo was taken in the late 19th century by William R. Godkin. The head is similar to the Phase II head shown in Figure 3. Red Dog was a famous warrior, involved in many of the most important Sioux campaigns. This photograph is currently at the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (Catalogue #09984500).



Figure 5. A portrait of Little Bear Chief, a Cree Indian. The photo was taken in 1893 by John K. Hillers. The tomahawk being held has an interesting head, whereby two similar Phase I cutouts are oriented mirroring each other. That this tomahawk was executed in this matter suggests two things: first, the cut out sequence not always standardized; second, the choice of cut outs might have been a collaborative process, one that was up decided upon by the blacksmith and the buyer. This photograph is currently at the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution (Catalogue #06125700).



Figure 6. A portrait of the important Piegan Chiefs in the late 19th century. The photo was taken in 1891 by John N. Choate. The men in this photograph were visiting the Carlyle Indian School. Second to the left is famous Pikuni chief “Shorty” White Grass who holds a “batwing” tomahawk. This photograph is currently at the Dickinson College Archives & Special Collections (PC2008.04, folder 6)



Figure 7. Detail photographs showing the recto (right) and verso (left) sides of the subject tomahawk from Figure 1. Note how the tacking differs. At some point in the tomahawk's history, the haft was retacked. The holes on the lefthand photo show that verso side originally had a matching "X" design.



Figure 8. A detail photograph of the subject tomahawk from Figure 1. This detail further shows the retacking on the verso side, in addition to the warped iron blade. Figure 7-8 demonstrate well the use that this particular weapon has experienced.

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February 21, 2014

Charles:

Your recently acquired Plains "batwing" tomahawk (H. Malcolm Grimmer Inventory #30787) is a wonderful piece; it is an authentic, c. 1860-70, Plains weapon, perhaps one of the finest "batwing" examples I have had the pleasure of handling.

Batwing tomahawks are rare. Enjoy having this one in your collection!

Best,

James D. Hart, Jr.

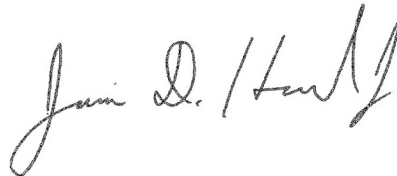
A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James D. Hart, Jr." The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the right of the typed name.

Figure 9. A letter from Plains weapons expert Jim Hart, to current the current owner, attesting to the rarity and quality of the subject tomahawk. Hart is noted authority on Plains tomahawks. The subject tomahawk was formerly in his collection.

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